

VZCZCXRO9421  
OO RUEHCN RUEHGH RUEHVC  
DE RUEHBJ #0620/01 0261111  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 261111Z JAN 07  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIJING  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4194  
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 000620

SIPDIS

SIDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2032  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: "DEMOCRACY IS A GOOD THING" ARTICLE IGNITES DEBATE  
AMONG CHINESE MEDIA, SCHOLARS

REF: A. FBIS CPP20070108332001

[1](#)B. 06 BEIJING 24430

Classified By: Political Section Acting Internal Unit Chief Chris Klein  
. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) An article in the influential weekly Study Times strongly endorsing democracy as "the best" political system has stimulated sharp discussion in Chinese media and intellectual circles. Our contacts speculated that "Democracy Is a Good Thing," by progressive scholar and author Yu Keping, is a trial balloon meant to create a positive atmosphere for (modest) political reform at the 17th Party Congress this fall. The Propaganda Department has handed down no guidelines on how to handle the article or the dynamic public discussion that has followed. Such discourse should not be seen as a harbinger of growing openness, media insiders said, as censors are redoubling efforts to keep a lid on controversial content. An editor at Study Times told us that one aim of printing "Democracy Is a Good Thing" was to create Internet buzz. In this respect, the paper has succeeded, as colorful commentary about the piece has filled online forums. End Summary.

"The Best Political System"

[1](#)2. (C) "Democracy Is a Good Thing" appeared in the in the December 25, 2006 edition of Study Times, an influential weekly published by the Central Party School (CPS) that has consistently presented a reformist editorial slant. The author, Yu Keping, is head of a progressive Party-affiliated think-tank called the Center for Comparative Politics and Economics and is a prominent advocate for political openness in China. Based on Yu's book by the same name, the piece is brief and straightforward. It opens with the declaration, "Democracy is a good thing." After outlining democracy's merits and shortcomings, Yu contends that it is "so far the best political system in human society." The article goes on to emphasize that a healthy democracy gives its citizens a say in the decisions that affect their lives. At the same time, veiled criticisms of China's current system dot the text. Economic advancement alone does not make for a perfect society, Yu argues, writing that "Even if people have the best food, clothing, housing and transportation means but have no democratic rights, then people still do not have complete human dignity." Near the end of the article, Yu argues that "if the government mainly relies on coercive means to force the people to accept a system they do not select themselves, then that is a domestic tyranny."

13. (C) The Mainland media have taken "Democracy Is a Good Thing" and sprinted with it. Although staid Party organs such as The People's Daily and the Guangming Daily are ignoring it and have printed no reaction pieces, several influential weeklies, notably Southern Weekend, Oriental Outlook and China Newsweek, have been vocal in their support for Yu Keping's arguments, giving pride of place to opinion pieces praising the article. The high-circulation China Newsweek's lead editorial in its January 15 edition delivered a ringing endorsement, stating that one of the lessons of the recent smash hit "Rise of the Great Powers" television miniseries (ref B) is that democracy and rule of law are part of what makes a great power truly great. "'Democracy Is a Good Thing' once again raises the most important question concerning the future of the nation," the editorial concluded. "All responsible Chinese people should be thinking about it."

An Influential Bellwether  
-----

14. (C) That Study Times, which has a subscription-only circulation of just over 2 million, has published such a story should come as no surprise, said Deng Yuwen (protect), a staff editor. Beyond its CPS affiliation, Study Times enjoys high-level backing, said Deng, particularly from Zheng Bijian and the China Reform Forum, the quasi-governmental think-tank that Zheng heads. The editor in chief, Zhou Weiming,

BEIJING 00000620 002 OF 003

is an open-minded advocate for more political openness in China. Deng said the publication of "Democracy Is a Good Thing" is in keeping with Study Times' role as "a theoretical paper, one where we float political ideas with a view to generating discussion and debate." He added that the newspaper aims its content primarily at two audiences: a) foreign observers of China, in order to give a sense of what is going on among the most influential Party scholars; and b) "our adversaries within the country," Deng said, meaning conservative elements who might oppose expanding reforms. Without elaborating, he said former Government officials who retain influence are particular targets.

Goal: To Create a Stink  
-----

15. (C) The timing of the article was not left to chance, conjectured Wu Jiaxiang (protect), an author and former aide to Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang who maintains connections with current officialdom. In Wu's view, the Study Times piece amounts to a trial balloon meant to test, and perhaps set, the climate in the run-up to the 17th Party Congress this fall. Wu described editor in chief Zhou as wanting to "create a stink," or stimulate discussion among people with differing viewpoints, especially online. If the voices backing Yu's article drown out negative reactions, then it will help create a positive atmosphere for political reform, Wu said. Nonetheless, he cautioned that it is important to keep Yu's piece in perspective. The kind of reform being discussed does not involve sweeping change to the system. Rather, Wu theorized that senior leadership is focusing on two limited areas. One is intra-Party democracy, that is, slowly introducing a system in which Party members compete for certain positions and where ordinary Party members participate in decision

making. The other reform push would center around expanding grass-roots democracy, permitting government elections to jump a level or perhaps more, from the village to the township and beyond.

#### Propaganda Department Stays Mum ...

-----

16. (C) The Propaganda Department has handed down no guidelines on how to handle the piece and the ensuing media commotion, said Zhou Qing'an, Assistant Professor at Tsinghua University's School of Journalism and Communications and a free lance writer. Both the Study Times piece and the China Newsweek article flirt with the censors' red line but do not cross it, he assessed. Were either article to give specific examples of a lack of democracy hurting a society or more democracy helping chieve progress, it would almost certainly attract unwelcome attention from the authorities. Deng of Study Times speculated that if "emocracy Is a Good Thing" had appeared in the opinion pages of a large circulation daily such as The Beijing News, which has regularly teste the censors with controversial content, it might have set off alarm bells among Propaganda authorities. But Study Times so far has had no repercussions from the Propaganda Department, Deng confirmed, noting that the paper has traditionally enjoyed more leeway to run sensitive stories than other papers.

#### ... But Controls Remain In Place

-----

17. (C) Even against the backdrop of open discourse on an inherently sensitive topic such as democracy, our contacts said they expect no imminent relaxation of controls as preparations for the 17th Party Congress progress. "It is a sensitive time," Zhou said, remarking that the Central Propaganda Department is under pressure to perform well as the political jockeying heats up. Deng of Study Times commented that the Propaganda Department is now taking a two-pronged approach to controls. On one hand, censors are increasingly issuing prescriptive guidelines at the beginning of the year or, in some cases, the month, presenting editors with lists of verboten topics and guidance on handling sensitive anniversaries or other events. On the other hand, the old system remains in place of individual officials keeping an eye on publications and issuing reprimands after the appearance of content they deem inappropriate. The results of the censors' enhanced

BEIJING 00000620 003 OF 003

approach have been mixed. While print outlets more or less continue to color within the lines, "no one can control the Internet," Deng remarked.

#### Vibrant Internet Commentary

-----

18. (C) Mindful of this, editors at Study Times hoped "Democracy Is a Good Thing" would stimulate animated online discussion, Deng said. Their wish has come true. Chat room debate has flourished, with the Mighty Nation forum hosting vibrant, occasionally pointed, back and forth. "I have a bit more to say to the Central Government," one netizen wrote. "Democracy is a good thing and leftism is a bad thing." In response, one forum participant shot back, "Dumb fools speak in such simple terms." As a rule, however, the bulk of the postings have been favorable. "Of course democracy is a good thing," one chatter wrote in a typical entry. "Supervision and courts are much better than tyranny." SEDNEY